



Principles to Get You Through Any Election with a Clear Conscience

Introduction

Catholics are called to be involved citizens. Part of this includes voting—both in local and federal elections. Because our Faith contains the fullness of truth, we have much to add to the social and political conversation.

However, many questions arise for Catholic voters: What principles guide my decision? Am I allowed to vote for a candidate who supports some immoral policies? What do I do when all the major candidates support grave evil?

In 2023, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) re-released a document titled, [“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: The U.S. Bishops’ Reflection on Catholic Teaching and Political Life.”](#) This document outlined the principles guiding Catholic voters.

In this e-book, we’ll use the USCCB’s guidance to summarize Church teaching on key issues relevant to today’s culture.

We also encourage readers to read the USCCB’s document for an in-depth reflection on the reasons why Catholics should be involved in public life and the ways we should form our consciences. Also, your local bishop may have guidance on how to navigate your current local political situation.

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Chapter 1: What Principles Should Guide Catholic Voters?

We Must Always Oppose Intrinsic Evil

Catholics are called to always oppose intrinsically evil actions. These are actions which, “are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons.” We’ll discuss which specific actions are intrinsically evil in the next chapter.

Because intrinsically evil actions violate human life and dignity, they must never be supported. Catholics are obligated first and foremost to oppose these actions. The bishops state that, “A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act...if the voter’s intent is to support that position” (no. 34).

We Must Serve the Needs of Our Neighbors

Catholics are also called to promote the common good. We have a “positive duty to contribute to the common good and act in solidarity with those in need...both opposing evil and doing good are essential obligations” (no. 24). These two principles go hand in hand, and the second flows from the first.



The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (no. 1906). *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* cites it as the first principle of Catholic Social Teaching, and as something “to which every aspect of social life must be related” (no. 164), and as the “primary goal” of society (no. 165). The *Compendium* calls us to conversion – a different vision – and a society to promote this vision, rather than one where only the strongest thrive. This vision begins with a proper understanding of the inalienable dignity of the human person, which is the foundation of a moral vision for society.

The bishops reaffirm this teaching when they say, “While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst” (no. 53).

As Catholics, we must look out for the basic needs of our neighbors. We all need food, health care, shelter, etc. to live and thrive. There is legitimate debate about the best way to meet these needs. Human flourishing is served through many avenues and is not limited solely to government policies. However, our political decisions must consider our neighbors’ needs, not simply our own self-interests.

(Note: our obligation to our neighbor is not solely fulfilled through political avenues. We must continue to perform acts of private charity as well. The primary point here is that our political decisions must serve the common good as well as our personal good. We cannot make political decisions for our personal benefit at the expense of our neighbor’s needs).

As our bishops stated, “Catholics may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems, but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended” (no. 20).

The Ends Don’t Justify the Means

When making decisions about voting, it’s important to remember that Catholics may not support evil policies to accomplish a good end. For example, eradicating

poverty is a good end. But abortion, contraception, or euthanasia may not be supported, even if the voter believes they will accomplish this end.

It's also important to remember the proper hierarchy: first, oppose intrinsic evil. Second, support the common good.

Our commitment to the protection of *innocent* human life should go hand-in-hand with our commitment to promote a society which cares for the weak and vulnerable. We may not simply oppose intrinsic evil and be done with it. We must also advocate for the appropriate social conditions which will foster human flourishing.

To illustrate: take the issues of abortion for fetal abnormalities and education that includes individuals with disabilities. As Catholics, we must oppose abortion (which threatens innocent human life) but also promote policies affirming human dignity after birth as well (such as integrating the disabled into society). We cannot simply oppose abortion and then refuse to help people after they are born. Our obligation towards our neighbor is not fulfilled just because we oppose abortion (as important as that is).

The Church's position on all these issues flows from Her understanding of the dignity of the human person.

Remember, “those who knowingly, willingly, and directly support public policies or legislation that undermine fundamental moral principles cooperate with evil” (no. 31).

2 Common Mistakes:

The bishops point out two basic mistakes that Catholics make when it comes to issues concerning human life and human dignity.

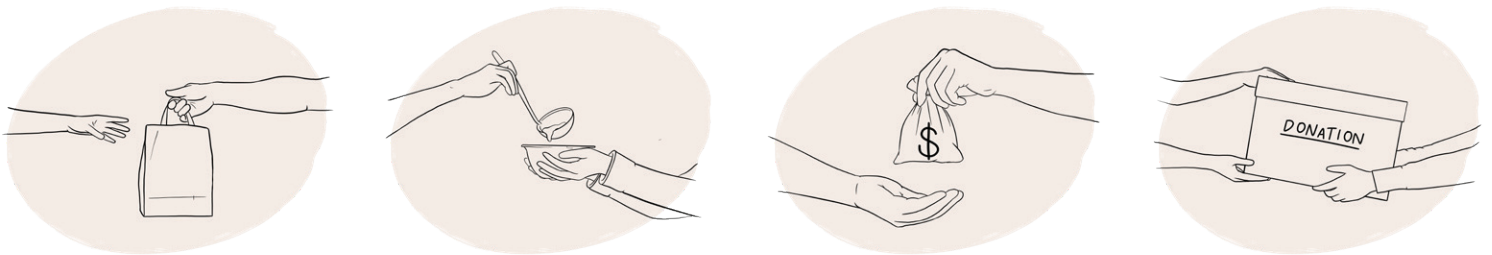
Mistake 1: All issues regarding life and human dignity are equal; there's no hierarchy of moral gravity.

In the Introductory Notes, the bishops reassert that “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks our most vulnerable and voiceless brothers and sisters and destroys more than a million lives per year in our

country alone.”

Protecting innocent human life takes precedence over everything else. We must always oppose the “direct and intentional destruction of innocent human life from the moment of conception until natural death.” This is “not just one issue among many” (no. 28).

Many social issues—such as pornography, redefining marriage, the death penalty, and unjust discrimination—violate human life or dignity in some way. However, we must first remember our duty to protect innocent humans from being killed. “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority” (pg viii). The right to life underlies all other rights.



Mistake 2: Focusing ONLY on protecting innocent life and ignoring other violations of human life and dignity.

Our fundamental duty is to oppose the “intentional destruction of innocent human life” (no. 28). However, that does not mean we may ignore or dismiss our duty to the common good regarding other important issues.

As mentioned above, many social issues undermine respect for human life and dignity, such as human trafficking, terrorism, torture, and gun violence. Our bishops remind us, “These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed” (no. 29). We cannot ignore our duty to our neighbor. We must allow the Church’s understanding of human dignity to inform our political and social decisions.

4 Principles to Keep in Mind:

The Catholic Church has 4 principles guiding social teaching. By letting these principles inform us, we can make prudent decisions when voting.

As stated above, our commitment to protecting innocent human life is preeminent. The right to life is the foundation of these principles.

1. Human Dignity

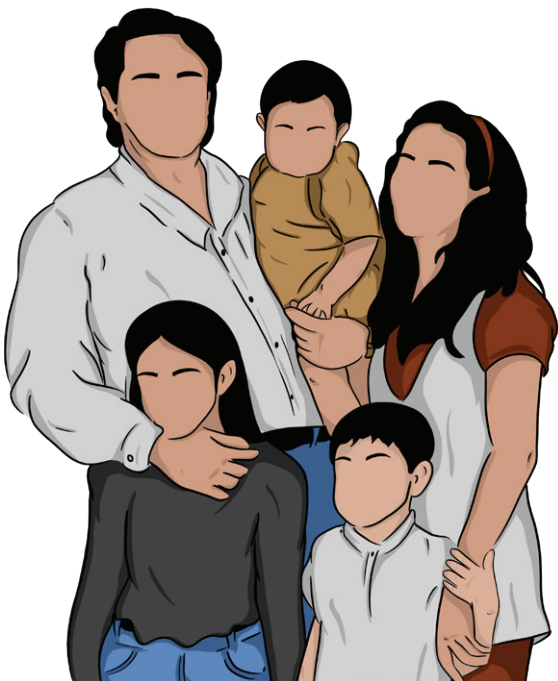
In the previous section, we discussed the many violations of human life and human dignity. In particular, we must oppose abortion, euthanasia, and any attacks on innocent human life. We must also support policies that uphold human dignity. (Specific issues are addressed in the next chapter).

2. Subsidiarity

Catholic social teaching holds that all issues must be addressed at the lowest practical level. It's important that “the larger institutions in society should not overwhelm or interfere with smaller or local institutions.” However, not everything can be handled on a local level. Therefore, “larger institutions have essential responsibilities when the more local institutions cannot adequately protect human dignity, meet human needs, and advance the common good” (no. 48).

In particular, the family is the core unit of society. The rest of society exists to uphold this fundamental unit. When crafting public policy, politicians must “uphold parents’ rights and responsibilities to care for their children, including the right to choose their child’s education” (no. 46).

This means, when choosing a representative, we must choose someone who will respect the proper responsibilities of local, state, and federal institutions. He must also protect the uniquely important role of the family.



3. Common Good

As mentioned earlier, all humans have basic needs. As Catholics, we must look out for the needs of our neighbor. We also have a duty to be good stewards of the earth. This can be accomplished in many ways, including government policies and/or private charities. We must exert prudence on these matters when choosing representatives.

When it comes to elections, it's also important to remember that "the economy must serve the dignity of the human person and the common good by respecting the dignity of work and protecting the rights of workers" (no. 50). We must make decisions about which candidate's economic policy will best serve the human person and the family.

4. Solidarity

Finally, we can't forget that we belong to a global family. It's important to remember that we have brothers and sisters around the world. In our social policies we must also have a "preferential option for the poor" (no. 53). Pope St. John Paul II defined this preferential option as, "A special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 42). Essentially, Christians have a special calling to pay particular attention to the needs of the poor.

This can be accomplished in many ways. One way you can live out solidarity is by supporting HLI.



Right now, families in developing nations are suffering from global, anti-family policies. Under the guise of "charity," organizations including the United Nations, MSI Reproductive Choices, and International Planned Parenthood push abortion, LGBTQ ideologies, and explicit sex-education in countries with historically pro-life

cultures. Often, these agendas are tied to much-needed economic funds. To make it worse, American tax dollars help fund these initiatives.

By supporting HLI, you can help families affected by anti-life policies. You'll empower expert missionaries to reach communities hit hard by anti-family culture. Your gifts will help train local leaders, teach kids about chastity, support struggling moms, and combat legislation threatening pro-life, pro-family values.

By giving to HLI today, you'll empower men and women in poor countries to resist Western, anti-life agendas. Today, your generosity can help rebuild respect for life and family.



Chapter 2: What Does the Church Say About Key Issues?

The Church teaches that we must oppose intrinsically evil actions. When it comes to political decisions, we must oppose those actions that violate human life or human dignity.

The issues listed here are intrinsically evil and may never be supported:

Preeminent Issues:

These are the first issues Catholics must consider when voting!

- Abortion (including abortions caused by hormonal contraception)
- Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide

In their Introductory Note the bishops explain, “In our nation, ‘abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others’ (Living the Gospel of Life, no. 5). It is a mistake with grave moral consequences to treat the destruction of innocent human life merely as a matter of individual choice. A legal system that violates the basic right to life on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed.”

Further Violations to Human Life:

- Human Cloning
- Genocide
- IVF
- Embryonic or fetal research resulting in the destruction of preborn life.
- Plus, any acts targeting innocent humans (such as civilians) or violating the sanctity of life

Violations to Human Dignity:

- Racism
- Torture
- Policies which treat workers as a means to an end
- Policies which treat the poor as disposable
- Inhumane working conditions
- Any attempts to redefine marriage to be anything other than the lifelong commitment of one man and one woman.
- Any attempts to redefine gender to be anything other than male or female.
- Surrogacy
- Contraception
- Human Trafficking

After opposing the above policies (our duty to oppose intrinsic evil), Catholics should also consider the following principles, which foster the common good.

Supporting the Common Good:

- As Catholics, we must work to “avoid war and promote peace” (no. 68)
- Uphold God’s plan for marriage and family life
- Support just wages for workers
- Support religious freedom
- Support a “preferential option for the poor and economic justice” (no. 73)
- Support “affordable and accessible health care” (no. 80)
- Support humane migration policies and work to end human trafficking
- Support Catholic education
- Promote justice and discourage violence
- Be a good steward of the earth
- Support appropriate regulation of the media (such as protecting children from pornography)
- Global solidarity



Chapter 3: What if All the Candidates are Out of Line with Church Teaching?

It would be nice if all candidates opposed intrinsically evil actions and promoted basic needs and human flourishing. We could simply pick whichever candidate whose policies are most likely (in our opinion) to succeed.

However, life is messy. These days, many candidates support at least one or two intrinsically evil actions. So, what should Catholics do?

When there's no perfect choice, we can make a prudential decision to limit the amount of evil. As our bishops stated, "after careful deliberation, [the voter] may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more likely to pursue other authentic human goods" (no. 36).

Essentially, we are called to take a serious look at the options available to us. Does one support fewer intrinsically evil policies than the other? If they both equally

support evil actions, does one support more positive policies?

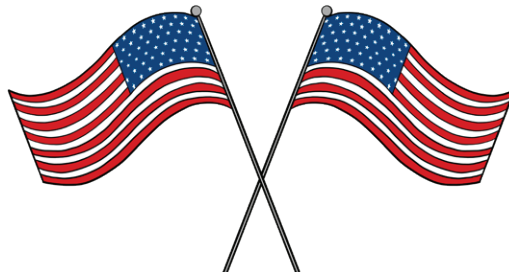
We must not support a candidate *because of* his or her support for intrinsic evil. However, when faced with two candidates who *both* support intrinsically evil policies, we may legitimately vote for the candidate who is most likely to lessen the amount of evil.

In a similar way, Catholics may support incremental legislation. If you have the chance to support a law limiting the number of innocent lives lost, you may. However, *you may only support these laws if the current law is more deadly!* (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 73)

To illustrate: if your state currently supports unlimited abortion and you have the chance to support a 15-week ban, you may support this law (since it will limit the number of innocent lives lost). Then continue working toward a law that protects ALL human life! However, if your state currently bans abortion entirely, you may not support any law allowing abortion at all (even in cases of rape or incest).



STEP-BY-STEP CANDIDATE COMPARISON GUIDE



WHICH CANDIDATES ARE YOU COMPARING?

Before you start, take a few moments to review each candidate's positions on the important issues, and the principles behind Catholic social teaching in the preceding chapters. Compare candidates running for the same office. If there are three or more, start with two then compare the better option to the next candidate.

A.

B.

STEP 1: THE PREEMINENT ISSUES

Jot down what each candidate plans to do regarding abortion and euthanasia.

A:

B:

Which candidate do you think will get results that more closely align with Church teaching on these issues? If...

- A would do better than B. → Vote for A.
- B would do better than A. → Vote for B.
- They're about the same. → Proceed to step 2.

STEP 2: ADDITIONAL HUMAN LIFE ISSUES

Jot down what each candidate plans to do regarding human cloning, genocide, IVF, scientific research that ends pre-born lives, and any acts targeting innocent humans.

A:

B:

Which candidate do you think will get results that more closely align with Church teaching on these issues? If...

- A would do better than B. → Vote for A.
- B would do better than A. → Vote for B.
- They're about the same. → Proceed to step 3.

STEP 3: VIOLATIONS TO HUMAN DIGNITY

Jot down what each candidate plans to do regarding redefinition of gender and marriage, contraception, racism, poverty, fairness to workers, surrogacy, human trafficking.

A:

B:

Which candidate do you think will get results that more closely align with Church teaching on these issues? If...

- A would do better than B. → Vote for A.
- B would do better than A. → Vote for B.
- They're about the same. → Proceed to step 4.

STEP 4: THE COMMON GOOD

Jot down what each candidate plans to do to promote peace, marriage, family, religious freedom, economic justice, Catholic education, stewardship of the earth, etc.

A:

B:

Which candidate do you think will get results that more closely align with Church teaching on these issues? If...

- A would do better than B. → Vote for A.
- B would do better than A. → Vote for B.
- They're about the same. → Proceed to step 5.

STEP 5: PRAYERFUL DISCERNMENT

If it appears that you are considering two candidates who are equally good (or equally bad) choices when viewed through the lens of Catholic social teaching, what do you do next?



Now it's time to go to a deeper level of discernment. Every individual is unique and that goes for political candidates too. Even when no candidate is perfect, you can make a prudential judgement about which one will do the most good or cause the least harm.

Look more closely at each candidate's platform. Are there nuanced differences in their views? Does one candidate prioritize an important issue more highly than another? Do you think one candidate is more likely than the other to achieve their vision?

Next, look more closely at the principles behind Catholic social teaching. Are you truly being guided by these principles, or are you confused by party affiliation, self-interest, or other worldly perspectives? Ask God to help you see these candidates through His eyes.

Now you can return to your evaluation, keeping this main principle at top of mind: *“One ought always to remember that the Right to Life is always the first and foremost and fundamental right above all others and must be given the highest consideration when electing a public leader.”* letter from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith by then Cardinal Prefect, Josef Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) *“Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion”* in 2004.

Start at step one and evaluate each candidate again. Careful and honest discernment will make it clear who is the right choice.

It may be the case that the better candidate is still pretty bad. Even when there’s no “good” option, Catholics are encouraged to use their vote to limit evil as far as possible. No matter who gets elected, remember to pray for their conversion, and that of all political leaders.



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